(c) what are the reasons for abnormally high visa fees charged by foreign Embassies in India; and

(d) what steps are proposed to ensure that Indians are not charged high visa fees?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) to (d) Government has revised visa fees with effect from 1-1-1995. It is the sovereign right of each country to decide what visa/consular fees should be charged. In some cases there are bilateral and regional arrangement on a reciprocal basis under which visa fees are charged on a mutually agreed rate. The visa fees charged by India takes into account fees charged by other countries and the cost of service provided. The visa fees charged from Indian national by a foreign country is within the purview of the sovereign right of the country which levies the fee.

Hike in passport fees

5474. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have been increasing the fees for issuance of passports regularly;

(b) whether it is a fact that efficiency and public convenience has not inncreased correspondingly;

(c) what steps are proposed to link issuance of passports and fees charged, with the efficiency;

(d) whether Government would review the high fees being charged presently?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) The passport fee was revised after a period of 15 years in July, 1993 keeping in view the increased cost of production.

(b) It should be noted that 17 out of 23 passport offices are issuing passports within two months after the receipt of the applications. The programme of computerisation is at an advanced stage and it is expected to be completed in all passport offices in the current financial year which will further add to the efficiency. Moreover, the passport offices are progressively being relocated in more spacious offices to upgrade facilities and convenience to the public.

(c) The passport fee is not directly linked to the time taken to issue of passports. The time taken by a passport office to process passports depends on various factors like the staff strength, infrastructural facilities, constant review of systems and procedures from time to time but is in no way related to the amount of fee charged.

(d) Since the fee is related to cost of service being provided and since the revised fee has been introduced less than two years ago, review is not called for.

Issue of machine readable passports

5475. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether there is a demand from some sections for issuing Machine readable passports;

(b) whether Government have conducted any study on the costs involved; and

(c) if so, what additional costs would have to be incurred by such new passports?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) to (c) As a part of the process of continuously upgrading the security features in passport booklets, introduction of Machine Readable Passports (MRP) is under consideration of the Government. In this